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SUBJECT: A JEWISH LEADER'S PERSPECTIVE IN AN ARAB CITY

REFS: (A) Casablanca 0163
(B) Rabat 1265
(C) Rabat 1272

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

2. (SBU) Summary: As President of the Moroccan Jewish community and Ambassador at Large for the GOM, Serge Berdugo has never been shy about expressing his opinions on the situation in the country. Berdugo, however, rarely strays from the official line due to his close official and personal ties to the palace. During a recent meeting the first, and presumably most important, topic addressed by Berdugo was security and terrorism in Casablanca. He was eager to share his insights on the April bombings at the consulate and to express his relative comfort with the overall situation in Morocco, despite some nagging concerns for his community. Berdugo talked at length about the topic du jour, the recent seizure of two weekly news magazines and the charges brought against their editor for violating the law forbidding criticism of the King.(refs:A,B) Other topics included the upcoming elections, the recent resignation of the Deputy Minister of the Interior (ref:C), and growing Islamist influence, as well as issues that reach beyond Morocco's borders to the Western Sahara and Moroccan-Israel relations. End Summary.

Security - Always a Factor for the Jewish Community

3. (SBU) On August 8, CG and poloff visited the downtown headquarters of Morocco's Jewish community. From the comfortable thirteenth floor office with one of the best views of the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, Serge Berdugo, President of the Community and King's Ambassador at Large, shared his views on recent and upcoming events. Berdugo launched into an exposition on Morocco's security situation. After expressing his concerns for the consulate and the April suicide bombings, Berdugo described the feelings of the Jewish community regarding security and terrorism. He claimed that the community at large is not overly concerned. Despite that, he said he personally feels pressures regarding the security situation but it stems from a fear of attacks against Morocco in general and not attacks on the Jewish community specifically.

4. (SBU) When discussing the Jewish community's presence in Morocco, Berdugo was confident that the Jewish population, no matter how small, will always be at home in the country. Despite his statement however, we frequently observe, and Berdugo confirmed, that most Moroccans speak in terms of nationals being Moroccan or Jewish not both. The "us and them" mentality goes both ways, Berdugo claimed, but it is without animosity or friction. The practice dates back to the French, he said, when residents of the country were officially classified as French, Moroccan Arab or

Israelites of Morocco. While he did admit that there are perhaps ten or fifteen percent of the population who dislike Jews, there was a consensus that this statistic is not uncommon worldwide.

Events of the Day

15. (SBU) The conversation turned to one of the hottest topics of the day, the confiscation of two weekly news magazines and the GOM's charges against their editor, Ahmed Benchamsi, for criticizing the monarchy in his editorial. Berdugo was fiercely critical of Benchamsi saying the act was stupid or crazy but mainly irresponsible. At the same time, however, he made clear his support for free speech and freedom of the press, though tempered by responsibility and integrity. "Morocco is not the U.S." said Berdugo. "In the U.S. there are those in authority and those who challenge authority, there is a balance. Here the situation is different."

16. (SBU) Berdugo spoke casually about another timely topic, the resignation of Deputy Minister of the Interior Fouad Ali Al Himma. Saying he had spoken to Al Himma just days before the announcement, Berdugo imagined that in all likelihood Al Himma was "just ready for a change." When asked whether or not the closeness of Al Himma and the King should be a matter of concern if Al Himma wins a seat in parliament or more Berdugo replied, "many in the Parliament are close to the King" then added offhandedly "Parliament does not exist." Explaining this remark Berdugo said, "People don't understand that the King wants a real parliament, a real judiciary, but he just can't do it now. The country is not ready."

Who's Afraid of the Islamists?

17. (SBU) When asked about the upcoming elections and the possibility of an Islamist gains, Berdugo responded, "I am not afraid of the Islamist, but if they win and there are ministers from the PJD, what will change?" Berdugo is optimistic that even if the Islamic Party of Justice and Development (PJD) make large gains, the current path toward reform will not deviate. Morocco, he said, is the strongest democracy in the region and we will continue to move in the right direction. He was certain that "Morocco is ripe for success and nobody wants to see that end."

On the Western Sahara and Israeli-Moroccan Relations

18. (SBU) Berdugo seemed less optimistic when he spoke of the Western Sahara autonomy talks. "If they arrive at a consensus it will be very dramatic." Berdugo admitted that finding a solution will not be easy, everything depends on "the notion that the world will change" he said. Berdugo views Morocco and Algeria as the leaders in Africa and as such they must work together for the region to prosper. Berdugo explained that neither the U.S. nor the EU really understand the problem. What must be overcome is not economic, political or even cultural problems, he claimed, but longstanding psychological issues. "People have been living like this for so long that it is difficult for them to imagine anything different" Berdugo said, in addition, "there is a new generation who has lost all past references and whose vision for the country is not the same as it was years ago."

19. (SBU) Berdugo offered his impressions of Moroccan-Israeli relations and his expectations of them for the future. He seemed hopeful that slowly Morocco and Israel can come together in the first step toward initiating a new relationship. Having just returned from Israel, he said that the Israelis "really understood" that diplomatic relations are out of the question for now. They understood that "Morocco is a good friend." He stressed his belief that both countries must undertake "multiple acts" to strengthen the relationship. He explained that no one, including Israel, wants to put the GOM in a difficult position and make it vulnerable to attack. He said that small and discreet acts, now underway, are what it will take to change the situation. Citing one example of just such an act, Berdugo spoke of a new Israeli postage stamp to be

released on August 27, 2007 honoring the former Chief Rabbi of Morocco and Jerusalem. The stamp, said Berdugo proudly, has a Moroccan flag running vertically along one side flanking a portrait of the Rabbi.

A Unique Position

¶10. (SBU) Comment: As a representative of the King and the leader of the Jewish community, Berdugo's attitudes about the current situation may not reflect the feelings of the general public in Casablanca but in all likelihood, echo the attitudes of his community. The small Jewish Community in Casablanca lives in a different "Morocco" than that of the average Moroccan. With limited opportunities, most of the youth from the community go abroad to study. The majority find well paying jobs overseas when they conclude their education and rarely return to Morocco. By comparison, recent Moroccan university graduates struggle to find jobs in a cohort with 40 percent unemployment. As if to emphasize this point, at the end of our meeting, Berdugo addressed a consular issue for someone in the community who had been refused a tourist visa. He said not getting a U.S. visa is a problem because most in the community consider it "normal" to have a one. They cannot understand when there is a problem. While his community may face roadblocks from time to time, according to Berdugo the current atmosphere for his Morocco is definitely one of optimism. End Comment.

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